PARTICIPATORY ACTION RESEARCH: BRINGING STUDENT ARGUMENTS UP TO PAR

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Motives for Teaching Argument as Inquiry

In a pluralistic society such as ours, "truth" is a function of social participation and argument is its mode of expression. We construct our world through language. Claims of authority impact our inquiry methods, and these methods accede to communal preferences. Therefore, the nearest we can approach "truth" is for our peers to confirm our claims. Our authority and mode of expression define one another, even as they define the powers that authorize them. Beneficiary of "postmodern" impulses, argumentative discourse has regained the status it first enjoyed in antiquity as knowledge-maker. Its rhetoric is interdisciplinary. Thinkers from fields as diverse as psychology, anthropology, and physics agree that "knowledge" is a language construct. Philosophers concur. Neitzsche, for instance, saw meaning-making as a "will to power," a kind of contract between persons to order civilization, minimize chaos, and promote self interests. Foucault attributed this power to a "will to truth" that rests on relationships governing who may speak with authority. Derrida claimed that discourse represents no underlying reality but is always mediated by interpretation. Argument is a participatory activity used to justify interpretation.

To prepare students to take part in the marketplace of ideas where multiple versions of truth compete for acceptance, we must educate them in the process of argument. Accepting process as a legitimate domain of its work, composition studies has secured its place in the contemporary academy. In this context, teaching argument has not received the attention it merits, perhaps because it remains one of our more difficult challenges. It is tied closely to logic, and while logic is something we do naturally, we have few words to describe its processes, like "deduction" and "induction."

Traditionally, argument was approached formally, through instruction in deductive and inductive reasoning. This method held ground until composition studies began to focus on process and discovered that formal considerations get in the way when students have to wrestle with form while inventing ideas and getting to know an audience. Over the past two decades, in search of more practical ways to teach argument, instructors have turned to informal methods, especially Stephen Toulmin's argument model. Featured in texts like Annette Rottenberg's *Elements of Argument*, Toulmin's case-making follows the practical method of legal reasoning to ask "What are you trying to prove?" "What evidence supports it?" and "How relevant is that evidence to the claim being made?" Using Toulmin gives students a discovery process that mirrors the way argument resolves conflict and justifies decision-making in the practical world of human affairs.

Despite this facility, however, concepts in Toulmin like the warrant—the assumed connection between the evidence and claim—elude the inexperienced critical thinkers that we often find in our writing classes. Actually, both formal and informal argument strategies have merit. It is useful for writers to pursue the informal method until a later draft in which their thinking has solidified. To check its logic, they can convert Toulmin into a syllogism because the warrant functions as its major premise, the evidence generalizes into its minor premise, and the claim is its conclusion. Yet neither approach adequately addresses the needs, interests, and motives of an audience. If an argument is a kind of contract we negotiate with an audience, we cannot

measure its efficacy without an audience with which to negotiate. Although peer groups in writing classes function as a kind of audience surrogate, they lack the concern of stakeholders who will be affected by an argument's outcome.

Benefits of a Contextual Inquiry Curriculum

To inject audience-as-stakeholders into the scene of argument, over the past four semesters I have contextualized controversy in hypothetical cases involving students as principals. The scenarios provide a context-rich series of overlapping issues which naturally intersect, thus avoiding pro-con polarities. Alone, this idea is hardly novel. Roman educators used declamations, or speeches on set legal and political topics for argument. As in today's moot courts, classical debates addressed conflicting claims in fictitious legal cases. The currency of this approach is reflected in books like Marilyn Cooper and Michael Holzman's *Writing as Social Action* (1989). Process pedagogies that relieve the urgency of a "do-it-all-at-once" product approach to composing are part of the larger social movement that has brought process center-stage, not only in education, but also in business and in government. A form of social action, argument as a process of inquiry presents composition instructors a compelling study. In business and government, and in areas of education other than composition, this phenomenon is known as *participatory action research.*

PAR is a recent phrase for an older idea: "learning by practice," a specific kind of learning activity which, like process pedagogies, reduces the kind of intimidation one meets when exploring the networks of relationships that accompany contextualized controversies. The novelty of argument in my classroom combines hypotheticals with *PAR*. The more I design hypotheticals by *PAR* principles, the more their potential for teaching argument becomes evident.

A Contextualized Preview of *PAR*

Post-modern perspectives that see writing as a social act predispose us to ground writing pedagogy in several

assumptions. Among them are the notions that writing is meant to be read, and that it works best when tailored to a specific audience and occasion. The views of I. A. Richards, Ann Berthoff, and others who believe that readers participate in the process of making meaning and producing knowledge cohere well with *PAR*, which presumes that grassroots stakeholders are vital to the inquiry process. Consequently, *PAR* supports the view that meaning arises in the exchange of ideas of partners in inquiry as they spar on a variety of issues. An inquiry process that lends itself to teaching argument, *PAR* shares affinity with our teacher-as-researcher-movement of the past quarter century. Despite the close ancestry, the composition family has yet to acknowledge this relationship, although shared liberal arts principles and democratic practices suggest a natural kinship. This article explains that kinship and how a *PAR* inquiry curriculum serves instruction in teaching argument.

Notwithstanding competitive tension between ideas that vie for social acceptance as part of an inquiry process, *PAR* casts learners in the role of joint venturers that makes competition a local tool of a global cause: knowledge-making. Werner Heisenberg's physics principle of uncertainty says that as a function of the act of observation, it is impossible for an observer to measure the location and momentum of a particle simultaneously. It is similarly impossible to determine the efficacy of ideas and practices from only one position. The more we vary the station for viewing a subject, the clearer its intersections with other subjects and the more informed our decision-making.

The process of decision-making, according to John Ramage and John Bean in *Writing Arguments*, is perhaps best modeled by the "well-functioning committee." Committee and other forms of group work seem preferable to either risking an individual's insensitivity to how a decision may impact others or involving every member who may be affected by the outcome. Consequently, I combine *PAR* with a committee model to make students advocates of a broader community. In W170 (Introduction to Argument) and W420 (Argumentative

Writing), taught simultaneously, our scenarios identify key players and their communal interests to set the stage for inquiry.

To illustrate, the course opens with *The Equus University Scholarship Case*. On day one, students are appointed to act as a university committee to select a sole recipient for a full tuition scholarship. A diverse applicant pool raises an affirmative action question. With no prior instruction, students write about whom they will choose and why, and withhold the results. Over the next two class periods, they analyze the arguments of several sources on why women and people of color do and do not need affirmative action and why the policy is or is not fair. When the committee convenes to deliberate, they are invited to do whatever they need to do.

At the end of this session, student responses to what they experience show much progress: (1) "I learned that two people can read the same sentence but interpret it in a different way, and that views can be changed by that interpretation." (2) "My views changed many times when someone else would share how they felt and bring up issues that I hadn't even considered." (3) "Each values different things more highly than others due to our personal beliefs." (4) "It is difficult for a committee to come to a resolution without an organized agenda and a leader to guide the discussion, keep everyone on track, press through a point at a time until a decision is made on each one, and bring the issue to conclusion."

In addition to experiencing what it means to participate in argument, students express their engagement in the issues: (5) "I never realized what a big impact it had on women and employment. At first I was totally against it as reverse discrimination. Now I see it has many positive aspects," and (6) "Today's activities really helped bond us together as a group and put us on a plane where we all feel free to express ourselves." [1]

After *Equus*, we turn to an environmental scenario: *The Case of NIMBY (Not in My Back Yard) in the Town of Osgood*. Here students become specific stakeholders of a fictional town modeled after a town nearby. As they investigate the facts I give them to determine whether a garbage crisis exists, they

learn the importance of establishing, applying, and arguing for criteria as the basis of argument. Like *Equus*, the *NIMBY*'s fact question is embedded in a larger social issue, evaluating Osgood's environmental policy. To the data sets I provide, each advocate composes a stakeholder history to share with classmates, which becomes a part of the facts. Following extensive reading and dialogue on recycling practices, the hazards of plastic incineration, and the economic and environmental costs of the alternatives, we conclude with the stakeholders negotiating a better policy. The concrete setting helps them feel the vitality of informed, participatory citizenship in building a better community; they can visualize how cooperation in decision-making and knowledge-production serves mutual interests. Thus, teaching composing becomes a means of teaching living.

Antecedents of a *PAR* Inquiry Curriculum

Rhetoric, as the parent field of argument, provides composition studies a rich multidisciplinary legacy. Adding *PAR* underscores why writing deserves more than a service role. It highlights the classical link between writing and the democratizing of knowledge. Since composition's teacher-as-researcher movement, after Janet Emig studied twelfth graders' composing processes three decades ago, composition classrooms have become workshops, the instructors facilitators, and the students, authors and peer critics. Like composition, *PAR*'s ancestry is interdisciplinary. David Deshler and Merill Ewert's survey, *Participatory Action Research: Traditions and Major Assumptions*, marks its lineage in John Collier's effort to enhance community race relations as Commissioner of Indian Affairs during FDR's administrations. Initially named action research, *PAR* thrives or fails on group dynamics. Collier, for example, determined that his project's complexity was better served by uniting researchers with grassroots practitioners. So he invited the stakeholders to work together to generate knowledge in the context of their shared interests and environment. At about the same time, the Soil Conservation Service applied action research to conflict resolution within

Navajo communities. Similarly, in the mid 1940s, Kurt Lewin turned an eye to action research as a *process*, experimenting with group dynamics among authoritarian, democratic, and leaderless social groups. This effort led to the founding of the Center for the Study of Group Dynamics at MIT. Since then, London's Tavistock Institute of Human Relations and Oslo's Work Research Institute are among the offspring of action research. Today, Cornell University sponsors a Participatory Action Research Network and a ParNet home page and Toolbox (1995) to disseminate information, including Deshler and Ewert's survey, which associates PAR with five traditions: agriculture technology, organizational management, community development, participatory evaluation, and educational research.

A brief review of these traditions shows their commonality to clarify *PAR's* potential partnership with argument pedagogy. Agriculture technology, for instance, welcomes local farmers and industry leaders to join instructors in experimentation. The term *participatory technology development* distinguishes *PAR* from top-down, traditional research. Further, its instructional programs teach students to be self-critical co-workers in this shared enterprise.

Similarly, the term for *PAR* in the field of organizational management inquiry is *action research.* Like *participatory development*, it resolves problems through collective investigation to develop an organization's human potential. To illustrate, Rutgers Graduate School of Applied and Professional Psychology trains its future clinical and school psychologists through an interdisciplinary curriculum and the use of an experiential component in which they learn practitioner skills within the constraints of their culture.

In community development, *PAR* is called *participatory research.* For example, educator Budd Hall of the Ontario Institute for Studies in Education develops his course work from settings that include Third World and feminist views, to emphasize "collaborative production of knowledge in real-life settings." In addition to community development, action research is an on-going part of a tradition known as *evaluation research.* For instance, action researchers like Michael Scriven

and Richard Paul are involved in projects to revise traditional concepts like critical thinking and to establish measurable standards for testing it. They define *critical thinking* as a "guide to belief and action" involving the "intellectually disciplined process of actively and skillfully conceptualizing, applying, analyzing, synthesizing and/or evaluating information."

Scriven and Paul believe that critical thinking can be measured by intellectual values that transcend subject matter divisions, such as "clarity, accuracy, precision, consistency, relevance, sound evidence, good reasons, depth, breadth, and fairness." By these criteria, critical thinking involves the continual use of a skill set rather than its mere possession. In other words, critical thinking is tested by whether others are willing to accept the results. Thus, their approach to program evaluation maximizes the role of stakeholders.

Although these traditions of *PAR* occur on the college level, much good work comes out of secondary education, where action research calls to mind precursors like John Dewey and Hilda Taba. Progressive educators, they believed that children learn best from activity and hands-on experience. The idea to incorporate group dynamics as part of the educational process took root in the "English as Adjustment" movement preceding their era. Paulo Freire's work offers a contemporary version. Freire links literacy with political empowerment, the ability to produce rather than reproduce culture by telling one's own tale of personal and public experience, widening life adjustment to social welfare. Subsequently, Ira Shor's *Freire for the Classroom* offers a sourcebook of this art of problem-posing. In turn, Freire has inspired Henry Giroux to write *Ideology, Culture, and the Process of Schooling* and *Schooling and the Struggle for Public Life*. Giroux asks educators to promote a critical theory of citizenship that resists oppression. Giroux's *Ideology* asserts that while public schools tend to institutionalize and to reproduce a culture's dominant ideology, they also provide a place to learn strategies of resistance.

Another name being linked to action research on the secondary level is *interdisciplinary instruction*. For instance, the web site "Reading the Skies" supports collaborative teaching.

There, Virginia educator Tim Thomas laments that school catalogs still list courses whose divisions were decided years past, when our mind-set was less multidimensional than today. He applauds Ted Sizer's Coalition of Essential Schools for encouraging instructors to become educational generalists of an interdisciplinary curriculum. Those taking this advice are promoting a Freirian kind of literacy that requires decoding lived experience. Their themes serve interdisciplinary study because they cover a broad topic range, reveal basic patterns about the individual disciplines represented, and stimulate both students and teachers to inquire. In addition, higher and secondary education have become partners on some parts of the Internet. For example, Stephens College's Catherine Wehlburg is one of a cadre of two thousand contemporary educators who have linked up with the Higher Education Processes Network (HEPROC) at <*http://heproc.org*> to support collaborative research on a wide range of subjects. Wehlburg argues that to serve students in a fast-changing, plural society, we must teach them to address "more than simple facts," by helping them think critically.

Parallels between *PAR* and Composition Studies

Parallels with the *PAR* movement in composition studies suggest their apt partnership. A recent case in point is Berthoff's advocacy of "problem dissolving." The method acknowledges the importance of interpretation to making meaning. Berthoff has always insisted that a theory of meaning include the "interpreter." She calls a "gangster theory" the version that reduces "meaning" to a "signifier/signified" relation with a "killer dichotomy." Likewise, Berthoff discounts traditional inquiry, whose subjects are manipulated or "treated" so that researchers can measure a treatment. "Problem-dissolving" resembles *PAR* inquiry in recognizing a reciprocal relationship between all parties to research.

With the help of Berthoff and others, today's composition educators tend to acknowledge third-party roles in knowledge production, which fits well with a student-centered curriculum

where reading, writing, speaking, and other language acts are critical to a learner's personal and linguistic growth. Also, since the Dartmouth Conference of the late 1960s, American educators have committed themselves to multiple ways to strengthen and test students' intellectual skills. The methods described in Herbert Muller's *The Uses of English* have become commonplace: reader responses to literature, interrelating whole language practices, incorporating drama, multimedia, and alternative forms of evaluating performance.

Further, teaching the writing process has made it possible, even natural, to teach writing through situations that expand the notion of context to intertextuality, in the sense that Susan Miller's "What Does It Mean to be Able to Write?" invites teachers to recognize a text as both a unique event and part of a larger process—a unified approach to writing as a literary, linguist, historical, and communal event. In the same spirit, C.H. Knoblauch and Lil Brannon's *Rhetorical Traditions and the Teaching of Writing* urges instructors to facilitate writers as knowledge-makers.

Significantly, writing instruction has now started to speak of *process* in the plural. Jack Selzer's "Exploring Options in Composing" cautions against isolating a single writing process even for a single writer, who has a repertoire of processes for different occasions. Multiple processes led Marilyn M. Cooper to offer an ecological model of composing that situates writers and their private and social systems within larger public systems that materially constrain these processes, yet which writers themselves may modify through their generative powers and interpretive skills. These works bring *PAR* to mind in that "problem-dissolving" improves with the systematic effort of all student-participants. Learning is flexible, experiential, inductive, processual, and served both by practice and theory. Reflection can be joined with action to resolve specific conflict through eclectic, innovative methods that suit the particular environment being explored.

As Freire has recognized, critical literacy is a vital method of pedagogies against oppression and the proactive resolution of conflict. Invoking pragmatic and progressive traditions, *PAR*

synergizes with contemporary writing instruction to democratize the making and use of knowledge in three primary ways: (1) promoting the capacity to think, learn, and develop as an indispensable alternative to forced or violent change; (2) recognizing an ecological or reciprocal relationship between individuals, communities, and the environment, and (3) applying ethical fairness to distribute the benefits of the learning process to all stakeholders.

Adopting A *PAR* Inquiry Curriculum for Argumentation

To establish an inquiry curriculum that brings *PAR* into the repertoires of writers writing, as the cases I mention early on suggest, one can design argumentative writing around problems of decision-making. When I compose such scenarios, I use the following questions as touchstones: Do tasks include learners in meaningful roles? Do they exemplify democratic contexts? invite diversity? welcome dissent? integrate parts of the learning process into a unified whole? The committee model asks students to put aside their private agendas to enter a communal dialogue. I mean dialogue in the sense that physicist David Bohm conceives of it: pooling communal voices to create knowledge. In *The Fifth Discipline*, MIT organizational expert Peter Senge credits Bohm with the unique insight into team learning that thought is a "systemic phenomena arising from how we discourse with one another." It differs from discussion in its "systematic effort" and "disciplined practice" (239–40).

The hypothetical cases I design set up a semester's dialogue whose outcomes turn upon the group dynamics of the participants. Writers experience argument as activity as well as idea. Consequently, they live what it means to say that "reasonable people reach different conclusions" about controversial issues. One student describes her experience as being led to "act in a way that we might not have done on our own. It helped us to put everything in perspective . . . [and] it gave me the ability to understand that I can learn something from anyone I meet and that at the same time, I can teach them something no matter how much smarter I may feel they are."[2]

Although the scenarios require students to assume identities for the sake of argument, they also permit them to express their own evolving beliefs. Another student comments, "I was open to ideas and presented mine in an open-minded fashion. We worked well together . . . delegating research obligations . . . [and] making a commitment to the team. Our group began to mesh. . . . We revealed cases we had found, offering a summary of how they could be used."[3] Therefore, what begins as transactional writing, which is motivated to get things done, becomes expressive writing, or what students believe. A third student remarks, "I came to the conclusion that Emmanuel should receive the money from the insurance company. They did not have any laws on the legality of the AIDS exclusion in the insurance policy in New York."[4]

Regular group meetings also provided an opportunity to experience the benefits of cooperation, as the following comment suggests: "By slowly and patiently exploring all of the angles of the topic, our group developed more reasons and supporting evidence for our argument than any of us had anticipated."[5] After intensive meetings, writers worked on individual drafts. Dramatizing argument this way exposed them to a wider range of truths and values than they would have discovered on their own and prepared them to argue better by visualizing, anticipating, and refuting their opposition. For instance, the sense of urgency with which students wrote is reflected in the following discussion:

If one were to query Osgood, Indiana's residents as to whether there is an impending garbage crisis, most of them would answer in the affirmative. Not only are they bombarded by the media with information concerning the existence of the crisis, but on a local level, political opponents focus their attention on safe waste disposal as integral components of their campaigns. The town newspaper, *The Daily Mirror*, keeps them informed about facts such as that fewer than ten new landfill permits have been issued in Indiana for the last four years, and that by 1996, fifteen landfills will close, leaving forty-two

counties without a landfill. Faced with a shortage of
landfill space and the controversy surrounding
incineration of waste (especially toxic waste), the people
of Osgood, with good reason, anticipate a garbage
crisis . . . unless measures are taken to alleviate it.
(Smith 1)

The first half of the course, through the *Equus* and *Nimby*
cases, students learn to conduct research systematically and to
annotate, evaluate, document, and take authority over their
sources. At the same time, they acquire experience with
primary sources by conducting interviews or surveys in the
local community appropriate to resolving the question of
affirmative action. As a part of these activities, students write
position papers from one of three perspectives: no affirmative
action, "soft" affirmative action, and "hard" affirmative action
as the basis for dialogue prior to a final draft. For example, in
establishing and applying criteria for evaluation, a final draft in
NIMBY redefined the garbage crisis as an environmental crisis,
arguing that "the landfill will probably close within the next
five years; industry violates the emissions ordinance; and the
recycling program is too costly." Another writer took a more
humorous view:

If a crisis is a threatening situation requiring immediate
action to avoid dire consequences, like the war in Bosnia,
the accident in Chernobyl, or Rosanne's running out of
Dove Bars, then I do not think we can conclude that
Osgood is running out of ways to dispose of its garbage
or that the current practices pose a serious threat to the
well-being of the community. (Daut 1)

After midterm, when students are comfortable with the
basic processes and elements of argument and know
themselves and others better, they have the mental and
emotional space to focus on a more extensive scenario. For the
final hypothetical, I alternate between the case of *Who Killed Joe
Patoka?* and *The Case of the Bloomtown School District vs. Ordinary
People.* In either event, I continue to rotate through claims of

fact, value, and policy. Finding an optimal vantage point from which to argue a case was known in classical times as "stasis." Stasis theory, attributed to Hermagoras and refined by Cicero, is endorsed by contemporary composition theorists, too, like James L. Kinneavy, Richard Fulkerson, and Jeanne Fahnestock and Marie Secor. Writers learn through this practice that the nature of the claim being asserted, either a reality of fact, value, or policy, affects the choice of evidence required to support it.

Briefly, factual matters require empirical data drawn from the observable world; evaluative claims require more, calling on writers to argue definitions and priorities of value; policy claims extend even further, to arguments of need, feasibility, as well as arguments for or against precedent, and so on. For instance, in the *Equus* case, students argued claims of value from their definitions and priorities, while in *NIMBY*, before negotiating policy, they argued the fact of whether a garbage crisis was evident and whether the current environmental policy was adequate. The sequence allows learners to move from arguments to convince themselves, to arguments to convince others, to negotiations that resolve community problems.

Perhaps the most popular of the scenarios so far is *The Case of Joe Patoka*. It begins with a fact issue, "Who Killed Joe Patoka?", where the facts support arguments of assisted suicide versus natural death from AIDS complications. Then we move to a question of value, "What should it cost Patoka's gay partner who lived with him in a committed relationship and who administered an illegal dose of pentobarbitol that was found in the decedent's blood at death?" Finally, we consider a question of policy, "Should Patoka's insurance company be allowed to use an AIDS exclusion clause to deny coverage?" To sort through the first question in *Patoka*, students receive an evidence packet, including the coroner's report, the decedent's final emergency room medical report and lab results, the state murder statute, and Patoka's health history.

This history shows a five-year pattern of liver decline, beginning with mononucleosis, followed by hepatitis B, and complicated by alcoholism. These records are ambiguous, both

to leave room for argument and to help students learn what to do with red herrings that throw them off the scent. For the "values" question, students hear a taped deposition of Patoka's parents, and for the "policy" question, they receive copies of the insurance policy and its change of beneficiary form, in addition to being allowed to depose a medical expert on liver disease. Meanwhile, they conduct their own inquiry into whatever they wish, to prove their cases in all three areas. Typically, the research topics involve euthanasia, gay rights, child abuse, and the legality of insurance exclusions for AIDS.

In their preliminary writing on these topics, students show they recognize the human dilemma that practical issues of argument pose. One writer states, "Some see euthanasia as mercy; others see it as murder. I find myself caught between the two. In no way do I support murder. However, I don't feel I have the right to say what others should do with their lives, especially when they suffer." Another student appreciates the dilemma of legislating morality: "The legal thing about euthanasia is—where in the hell would the boundary be? Extenuating circumstances happen all the time; each case is unique."[6]

Probably the highlight of the semester for students, however, is their opportunity to conduct a mock trial of Patoka's alleged murderer, his lover Scott Emmanuel. Because the class is an elective and is usually small (six to twelve students), all of them participate either on the prosecution or defense teams. Using this time to instruct them in challenging the credibility of expert witnesses, I allow three class periods for the trial, which I record on tape and critique afterwards. As a pre-drafting activity, the trial provides reflective time for students to decide in their own papers whether Emmanuel is guilty or not. One student's reflective process was described this way: "I wrote down anything said during the trial I had a question about. I then went back to each point and found everything I could to either support or refute it."[7]

Other remarkable features of the writing on Patoka take the form of the following comments. The first of them shows a grasp of the complexity of defining the criminal standard of proof: "My colleagues in the legal professional generally hold

this standard to be difficult to define but easy to 'feel.' *Black's Law Dictionary* holds the phrase [beyond a reasonable doubt] to mean 'fully satisfied, entirely convinced, satisfied to a moral certainty'."[8] The next account shows the careful application of the murder statute's criteria to arrive at its conclusion:

> Murderer can be defined as a person who kills another human being while committing or attempting to deal in a schedule I, II, or III controlled substance. Emannuel admitted to stealing pentobarbital, a schedule III controlled substance, and to bringing it home. However, after reviewing all of the evidence, I find no conclusive proof that the pentobarbital did, in fact, kill Patoka. Therefore, I find the defendant not guilty of murder. (Sabens 5)

Another writer clarifies this lack of evidence:

> I find the prosecution's claim that Patoka's hepatic liver was unable to filter out the substance Emmanuel provided him unsubstantiated. With the exception of Deborah Robinson, a registered nurse, there was unanimity among the medical experts called on to testify on this point: the amount of pentobarbitol ingested was not enough to have caused his death from respiratory failure. These experts were physicians, trained to interpret and judge the effects of medications. I must place greater confidence in them than in Ms. Robinson. (Carter 6)

In contrast to *Patoka*, which evolved from a friend's account of a former schoolmate, the *Bloomtown* case evolved when a neighboring county school system in Kentukianna made the papers for attempting to censor Judith Guest's novel *Ordinary People* from a high school classroom. To create a context for the controversy, I present stakeholder caricatures, from whom students elect their roles. Adding their first names to character surnames, students evolve these roles as they filter

the facts through their own interpretations and values. The number of roles varies to match the number of students in the course. *Bloomtown* begins by orienting the players to the facts below.

In the hypothetical, *Ordinary People* was assigned by Bloomtown High's new English teacher M. Liberty in a Modern Novels class, a senior elective. Student Dud DoRight carries the book home, where his mother reads it and takes offense at the language. She phones the instructor to complain, but M. Liberty refuses to drop the project. Therefore, Ms. DoRight turns to Principal Middleman. A former English teacher, Middleman consults with the English chair, M. Buckstop; the school psychologist, M. Wholeheart; and the School Board chairperson, M. Worry. These persons give conflicting advice. Meanwhile, some of the seniors, most of whom are not in M. Liberty's class, are planning a walkout to protest censorship. After speaking with Student Council President Blunt and with a local newspaper reporter, M. Scoop, Middleman calls a press conference to squelch rumors and to elicit cooperation to resolve this community problem.

The press conference provides the first opportunity to discuss the book's merits. From the outset, then, the case poses a question of fact: What IS obscenity? and of value: Is *Ordinary People* obscene? To prepare their cases, students research obscenity and investigate beliefs in the local community. They also receive essays from me and collect their own. They draft their arguments of fact and value before the press conference so they have something thoughtful to share. At the press conference, Ms. DoRight first offers her argument against the book based on her definition of obscenity. M. Liberty then rebuts Ms. DoRight. A debate unfolds, as the dialogue moves other characters to join in. Although the primary policy makers seem to be Middleman, Buckstop, and Wholeheart, additional stakeholders include other parents, teachers, students, and board members.

A second press conference is eventually held to air further research and reflections on the first round. For this meeting, students revise their drafts. From the outset, the second conference is structured by the group dynamics that flow from

Middleman's asking the participants for additional input. At the conclusion, she asks for proposals of a school-wide policy for or against censorship that consider, as far as possible, the interests of all major stakeholders. At this point, the third task begins: negotiation. In a smaller class, everyone is a negotiator. In a larger class, students form negotiating teams and delegate a speaker to represent them at the table. The first task for negotiators is to establish the procedural rules, a time-table, a sequence of issues, and a list of activities.

Following suggestions from *The Aims of Argument*, students begin to negotiate by looking at all positions. Each negotiator briefs the others on his or her position. Students see that people are for or against censorship for quite different reasons, derived from their own values and experiences. So the next task is to identify exactly where disputes exist: in the facts? the assumptions? the principles? the needs? the values? the priorities? the interpretations? the implications? This determination is necessary for the solution to address the real interests of the participants. Thus, the process avoids binary values that reduce choices to either-or. At this point, the negotiators draft a collaborative statement of the concerns that a viable solution must take into account. The parties then conduct further research, as needed, and brainstorm creative options. The final paper argues a policy which honors these values, to make negotiation less a matter of compromise than of synthesis and transcendence. The on-going dialogue and drafting ultimately establish the pool of common meaning which Bohm has advocated and which also underlies the process of triadic problem-dissolving which Berthoff supports.

Last semester's class, for example, agreed on three ultimate values to unite its participants, despite their differences: (1) whatever is in the students' best interests, (2) whatever prepares them to live in the real world, and (3) whatever enables them to resolve conflict peacefully and effectively. After first conceding the impossibility of defining "best interests," they concurred that keeping students safe from emotional and physical harm is essential. They recognized that all parties did, in fact, have these interests at heart,

notwithstanding differing interpretations of the book. Founded on these precepts, through dialogue, the class created a *Bloomtown* policy that avoided censorship, honored personal choice, and modeled the democratic process of conflict resolution. Below is an excerpt from one writer's final draft.

Report to the Bloomtown School Board:
A Proposal for Academic Freedom and Parental Responsibility

The Bloomfield School Corporation recognizes that diversity is real and important in a nation such as ours. Within our community, a wide range of ethnic, social, religious, educational, financial, and racial . . . views are represented. That diversity demands sensitivity to differences, perceptions, values and morals. Therefore, we have adopted the following policy statement regarding the resolution of differences. . . . concerning curriculum. American-held ideals necessitate a policy which 1) discourages censorship, 2) allows an individual to make choices, as long as they do not endanger others, and 3) permits individual rights instead of demanding acquiescence to the demands of the majority.

As professionals dedicated to their students' successes, our teachers go above and beyond what is expected of them to cooperate with parents. [Yet] because of the differences of opinion that will inevitably occur as to the value or propriety of a particular piece of study material, we encourage our parents to contact the teacher without delay if the parent finds any objectionable material. If, after discussing the issue with the teacher, the parent still believes . . . [the] material offers no advantages to outweigh the objections, the parent may take the issue to the Vice Principal for Curriculum, who will confer with both teacher and parent in seeking a resolution. If necessary, . . . [they will select] alternative material for the individual student which meets the teacher's goals and appeases the parent's objections. In seeking an on-going dialogue with our parents, we hope to help our students appreciate diversity and learn to

resolve differences amiably, items at the very heart of the educational process. (Carter 11–15)

Although these words belong to one student, their substance reflects the collective knowledge generated by weeks of research, reflection, and debate on the issue of censorship in the context of public secondary education.

Because inherent in any solution is the next problem, I do not pretend that combining case scenarios with *PAR* is without difficulty. The hypothetical case in Bloomtown, for example, was not as messy as its historical analogue in Kentuckiana. Emulating outside perspectives within the safety of classroom walls invites a certain naïveté. However, if these four semesters are indicative, in contrast to six years of teaching without *PAR*, it beats the alternatives so far. Simulations provide learners an enduring experience in lived dialectic, the give and take of ideas, truths, and values. Because these cases nourish group dynamics, promote pluralism, and resolve conflict by making all stakeholders matter, they also avoid killer dichotomies like majority/minority, which ultimately do violence to free choice, and which consequently tend to make democracy just another "gangster" theory.

NOTES

1. I thank the following students of my fall 1997 argument class for permitting me to publish their responses to the *Equus* committee's deliberations: Andrew Adams, Kim Bush, Angie Finn, Amy Kiefer, Pat LeMaster, and Dawn Reynolds.

2. Josie Lopez, a W420 student in my fall 1995 argument class, provided this comment.

3. Whitney Mauck, a W420 student in my fall 1995 section, offered this remark.

4. Shawn Busby, a W420 student in my fall 1995 section, contributed this insight.

5. Stacy Shumaker, a W420 student in my fall 1995 section, made this observation.

6. I am grateful to Amanda Peters and Jennifer Robinson, W420 students in my fall 1996 class, for their comments on euthanasia.

7. Shannon Sabens, a W170 student in the fall of 1996, provided this process note.

8. Cathy Carter, a W420 student in the fall of 1996, offered this definition of "beyond a reasonable doubt."

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